

# Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response

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## Summary

Fighting continues across Syria, pitting government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom also are fighting amongst themselves. Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 2.3 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). Millions more Syrians are internally displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance, of which the United States remains the largest bilateral provider, with more than \$1.3 billion in funding identified to date. U.S. assistance to opposition forces was placed on hold in December 2013, as fighting in northern Syria disrupted mechanisms put in place to monitor and secure U.S. supplies. The war is exacerbating local sectarian and political conflicts within Lebanon and Iraq, where escalating violence may threaten stability.

Neither pro-Asad forces nor their opponents appear capable of consolidating their battlefield gains in Syria or achieving outright victory there in the short term. Improved coordination among some anti-government forces and attrition in government ranks make a swift reassertion of state control over all of Syria unlikely. Conflict between the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, a.k.a. ISIS) and other anti-Asad forces has intensified.

In spite of an apparent shared antipathy toward ISIL's brutality among opposition groups, many anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria. As of January 2014, the most powerful and numerous anti-Asad armed forces seek outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. Islamist militias seeking to impose varying degrees of Sunni Islamic law on Syrian society, including the newly formed Islamic Front and Al Qaeda affiliates such as ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra, have marginalized others, including some who had received U.S. assistance.

The United States and other members of the United Nations Security Council seek continued Syrian government cooperation with efforts to remove chemical weapons and related materials from Syria. The Security Council also has endorsed principles for a negotiated settlement of the conflict that could leave members of the current Syrian government in power as members of a transitional governing body, an outcome that some opposition groups reject. Administration officials indicate they are considering the resumption of assistance to select opposition groups. The conference version of the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (H.R. 3547) would authorize the Administration to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes notwithstanding other provisions of law that have restricted such assistance to date.

The humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria now appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to contain or fully address. Large numbers of Syrian refugees, the growth of powerful armed extremist groups in Syria, and the assertive involvement of Iran, Turkey, and Sunni Arab governments in Syria's civil war are all negatively affecting the regional security environment in the Middle East. In light of these conditions and trends, Congress is likely to face choices about the investment of U.S. relief and security assistance funding in relation to the crisis in Syria and its effects on the region for years to come. For more analysis and information, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mary Beth D. Nikitin, and CRS Report R43119, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, by Rhoda Margesson and Susan G. Chesser.

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## Overview

Fighting continues across Syria, pitting government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom also are fighting amongst themselves. Government forces are fighting on multiple fronts and have lost control of large areas of the country over the past two and a half years. However, the Asad government continues to receive external support from Russia and Iran, and, contrary to some observers' predictions, has shown no indication of an imminent collapse. Opposition forces are formidable but lack unity of purpose, unity of command, and unified international support. Various opposition groups have, depending on the circumstances, cooperated and competed for influence and control. At present, significant elements of the opposition are engaged in outright conflict against one another. Some observers suggest that more than 75% of the armed opposition may seek to replace the Asad government with a state ruled according to some form of Sunni Islamic law.<sup>1</sup> Kurdish opposition groups control large areas of northeastern Syria and may seek autonomy or independence in the future.

Meanwhile, chemical weapons inspectors work to oversee and implement the terms of the September 2013 chemical disarmament agreement endorsed by the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council in Resolution 2118. Some rebel groups and regional governments have criticized the U.S. decision to forego a threatened military strike against Syrian government forces in response to the Syrian military's alleged use of chemical weapons in August. Members of Congress expressed a broad range of views regarding the potential use of force in Syria during intense debate in September, and Obama Administration officials have stated that they believe that the threat of the use of force by the United States was instrumental in convincing Syrian President Bashar al Asad to commit to the disarmament plan.

With internationally supervised disarmament proceeding, U.S. diplomatic efforts seek to set terms and conditions for negotiation to end the fighting and establish a transitional governing body as called for by a communiqué agreed to in Geneva in June 2012, which was further endorsed in Resolution 2118. Opposition forces remain divided over the questions of whether and under what conditions to participate in negotiations with the Asad government. The U.S.-recognized National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (or Syrian Opposition Coalition, SOC) has previously set forth several conditions for its participation in talks, including a demand that President Asad and unspecified other officials will not be members of any transitional governing body.

SOC members have yet to settle on a formal position on the matter. Some groups, including several powerful Islamist militias, reject current proposals for negotiation and appear committed to continuing their military operations whether or not U.S.-backed members of the opposition decide to participate in or commit to agreements at a "Geneva-II" conference. In their January 2014 Paris communiqué, the United States and other members of the "Friends of Syria core group of countries" [AKA the "London 11" or "Core Group"]<sup>2</sup> stated that, "All armed groups must respect democratic and pluralistic values, recognize the political authority of the National

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Charles Lister, "Syria's insurgency beyond Good Guys and Bad Guys," *ForeignPolicy.com* – Middle East Channel (blog), September 20, 2013, and, Aron Lund, "The Politics of the Islamic Front 1: Structure and Support," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis* (blog), January 14, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The group consists of: Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Coalition [SOC] and accept the prospect of a democratic transition negotiated in Geneva on the basis of the objectives listed above.”<sup>3</sup> Statements by the Islamic Front reject secular democracy, the political authority of the National Coalition, and negotiations with the Asad government. These perspectives may not preclude cooperation by outsiders with the Islamic Front against Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria.

President Asad has signaled his government’s willingness to participate in discussions with the non-extremist opposition, but rejects calls for his resignation. Some Syrian officials have hinted that he may seek reelection later this year (see “Pro-Asad Forces” below). The United States and other backers of the opposition said on January 12 that the prospect of a regime-organized election with Asad as a candidate “fully contradicts the Geneva II process and its goal of a negotiated democratic transition.” These divergent perspectives among Syrian parties to the conflict, which are reflected among their respective international backers, lead many observers to question the prospects for negotiations to end the conflict in the near future.

Meeting in Paris in January 2014, the Core Group reiterated their support for negotiations on the terms of the Geneva communiqué. They also stated their shared view that once a Transitional Governing Body [TGB] called for by the Geneva communiqué is established by mutual consent and has full control over state security services, “Asad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no role in Syria.” The Russian Foreign Ministry criticized the Core Group’s October 2013 statement to that effect as “an attempt to predetermine the results of Geneva II” and “an attempt to revise the key elements of the Geneva communiqué.”<sup>4</sup> To date, Russia has viewed efforts to link negotiations explicitly with Asad’s departure as unwarranted and illegitimate attempts at regime change, while encouraging Asad and others to participate in talks.

Russia also has expressed concern at the SOC’s delay in determining whether or not it will participate in negotiations and supports Iranian participation in the talks. In late 2013, joint U.N.-Arab League Envoy for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi also called Iranian participation in talks “natural and necessary,” but many opposition groups reject Iranian participation. Secretary of State Kerry has called on Iran to accept “the Geneva I premise” as a prerequisite for its participation, which he has said could be “constructive.”

All of these differences may delay the opening of talks scheduled for January 2014, and could complicate the talks themselves as well as the eventual enforcement of any agreement reached.

Inside Syria, neither pro-Asad forces nor their opponents appear capable of consolidating their battlefield gains or achieving outright victory in the short term. Improved coordination among some anti-government forces and attrition in government ranks makes a swift reassertion of state control across all of Syria improbable. Combat between the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, a.k.a. ISIS)<sup>5</sup> and other anti-Asad forces across northern Syria has intensified since late December 2013, leading to the expulsion of ISIL forces from some areas. The war in Syria also is exacerbating local sectarian and political conflicts within Lebanon and Iraq, where violence is escalating and may threaten national stability.

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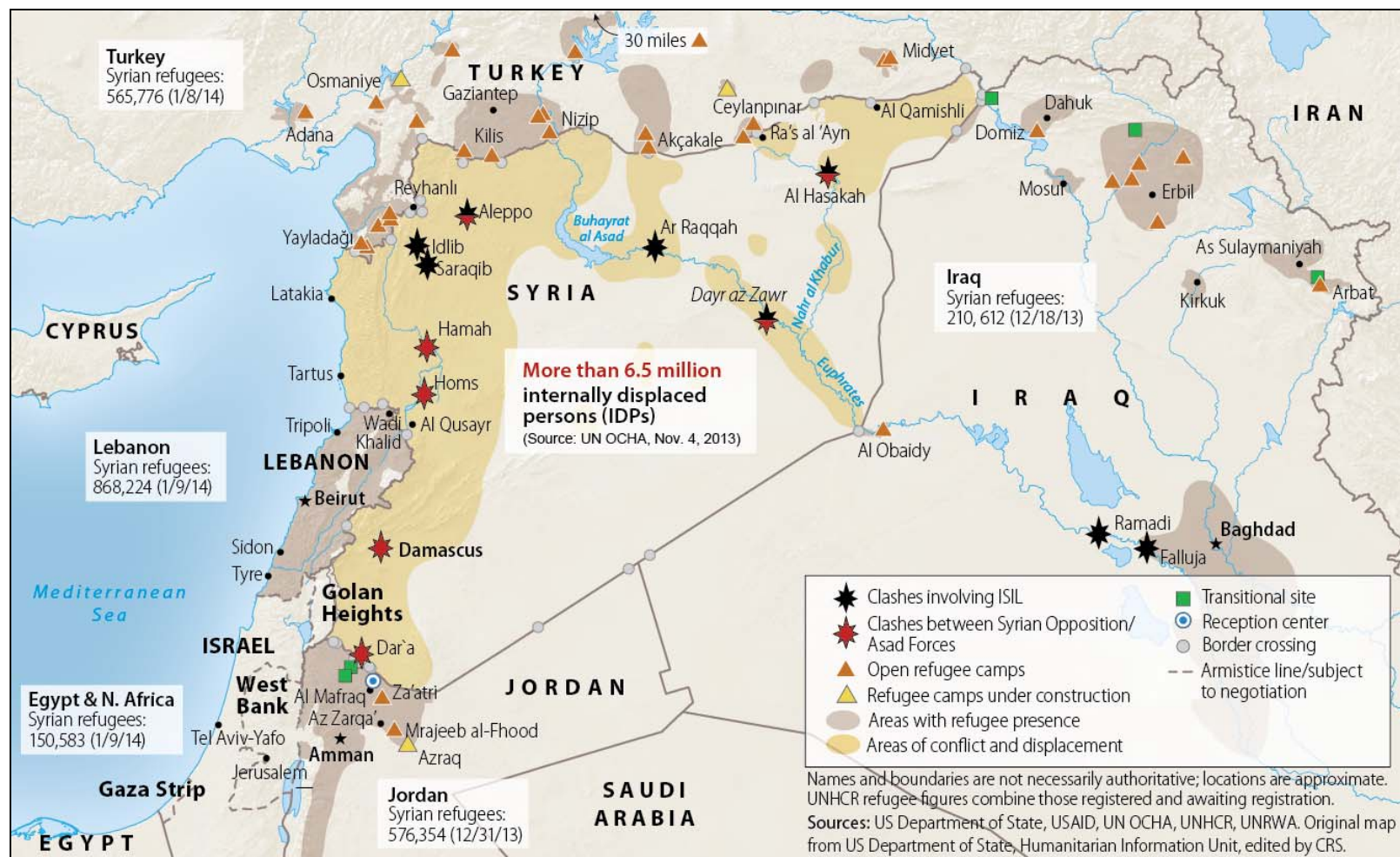
<sup>3</sup> Foreign Ministry of France, Declaration of the Core Group Ministerial Meeting on Syria, Paris, January 12, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Voice of Russia, “Friends of Syria report: hidden threats to return to military scenario – Lukashevich,” October 23, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also is commonly referred to in English language reports as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS). *Al Sham* is an Arabic term for the Levant. Some Syrians refer to ISIL as “Daesh,” its Arabic acronym.

**Figure I. Conflict Map and Regional Humanitarian Situation**

As of January 2014



In spite of an apparent shared antipathy among opposition groups toward ISIL's brutality, many anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria. As of January 2014, the most powerful and numerous anti-Asad armed forces seek outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. Islamist militias seeking to enforce varying degrees of what they recognize as Sunni Islamic law in Syrian society—among them members of the Islamic Front (see below) and Al Qaeda affiliates such as ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra—have marginalized other armed groups, including some that received U.S. assistance.

As clashes and diplomatic discussions continue, Syrian civilians continue to suffer. U.N. sources report that since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 2.3 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). According to U.S. officials, more than 6 million Syrians are internally displaced. The United States is the largest bilateral provider of humanitarian assistance, with more than \$1.3 billion allocated to date.<sup>6</sup> In December, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) appealed for an additional \$6.5 billion in humanitarian assistance funding to respond to the crisis in 2014. For more information on related humanitarian issues, see CRS Report R43119, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, by Rhoda Margesson and Susan G. Chesser.

The negative effects of the humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria now appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to independently contain or fully address. The region-wide flood of Syrian refugees, the growth of armed extremist groups in Syria, and the assertive involvement of Iran, Turkey, and Sunni Arab governments in Syria's civil war are negatively affecting overall regional stability. Policy makers in the United States and other countries appear to feel both compelled to respond to these crises and hesitant to embrace options for doing so that may have political and security risks such as the commitment of military forces to combat or the provision of large-scale material assistance to armed elements of the opposition. In light of these conditions and trends, Congress may face tough choices about U.S. policy toward Syria and the related expenditure of U.S. relief and security assistance funds for years to come.

## Anti-Asad Forces

Anti-Asad forces have been engaged in a series of realignments and internal conflicts since mid-2013, creating complications for external parties seeking to provide support, including the United States. To date, the United States has sought to build the capacity of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) and local activists as well as to provide nonlethal and lethal support to armed groups affiliated with a Supreme Military Command Council (SMC) under the leadership of General Salim Idriss (see "U.S. Policy and Assistance" and the **Appendix** below). As mentioned above, the SOC is debating potential participation in planned talks with the Asad government in Switzerland. After the SOC membership narrowly reelected Ahmad Jarba to serve as its leader in early January 2014, dozens of individual members resigned. U.S. officials have described the SOC's participation in the planned Geneva II talks as "pivotal" and continue to encourage SOC members to support attendance at the conference.

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<sup>6</sup> Some U.S. assistance to opposition forces and some humanitarian assistance were placed on hold in December 2013, as fighting in northern Syria disrupted mechanisms put in place to monitor and secure U.S. supplies.



In late 2013, a number of powerful Islamist militia groups—some of which formerly recognized the leadership of Idriss and the SMC—announced the formation of a new Islamic Front,<sup>7</sup> which many expert observers now consider to be the most powerful element of the armed opposition in northern Syria (see the **Appendix**). The Front’s charter declared its goals to include “the full overthrow of the Al Asad regime in Syria and for building an Islamic state ruled by the sharia of God Almighty alone.”<sup>8</sup> The Front explicitly rejects the concepts of secularism and a civil state, rejects “foreign dictates,” and is committed to maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria. Front leaders have rejected the SOC, and the Front’s military commander—Jaysh al Islam leader Zahran Alloush—has called for individuals who choose to participate in negotiations with the Asad government under the auspices of the Geneva II conference to be placed on a most-wanted list.<sup>9</sup>

The Islamic Front and other recently created opposition coalitions active in northern Syria, such as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and the Mujahedin Army, have been engaged in a campaign to evict the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from areas of northern and eastern Syria since early January 2014. Jabhat al Nusra, another Al Qaeda-affiliated militia and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, has sought to mediate between ISIL and its adversaries. In some places, Al Nusra fighters have joined anti-ISIL groups in criticizing ISIL and fighting its operatives. In general, Al Nusra is viewed as more accommodating and cooperative than ISIL by other opposition forces, including some who oppose its ideology. Foreign fighters associated with ISIL are reportedly being especially targeted by other groups that take issue with what they see as ISIL’s divisive extremism and brutality.

These ISIL-opposition battles have momentarily supplanted deeper questions about the future composition and direction of the Syrian opposition and the provision of external support to its armed elements. In December, Islamic Front fighters took control of facilities and equipment belonging to the U.S.-backed SMC, including some U.S.-supplied materiel. The incident, the Front’s continued rejection of the U.S.-preferred strategy of negotiation, and the group’s long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state in Syria raise fundamental questions about whether and how the United States should engage with the Front, despite its capabilities and prominence. The SMC’s apparent inability to secure U.S. provided materiel also raises questions about the security of any further assistance that may be provided by the United States.

## Pro-Asad Forces<sup>10</sup>

Syrian President Bashar al Asad has continued military and security operations against insurgents while pursuing political agreements that he likely judges could bolster international support for his government. Syrian military airstrikes in northern Aleppo province killed more than 500 people in late December, according to local activists,<sup>11</sup> while government officials cooperated

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<sup>7</sup> The following armed groups constitute the core of the Islamic Front and were the original signatories of its charter: Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement; Suqur al Sham Brigades; Ansar al Sham Battalions; Jaysh al Islam; Liwa al Tawhid; and Liwa al Haqq.

<sup>8</sup> Charter of the Islamic Front. For translation, see U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) Document TRR2013112671951889, Syria: New ‘Islamic Front’ Formation Releases Charter, November 26, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Twitter, @zahran1970, January 6, 2014, 12:56 PM.

<sup>10</sup> Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 29, 2013.

with international efforts to destroy Syria's chemical weapons and expressed willingness to attend proposed peace talks with the opposition.

The Syrian government has reiterated its willingness to attend Geneva II negotiations, but it is unclear whether Asad is inclined to make concessions that would significantly undermine his hold on power, particularly if he assesses that his military ultimately can prevail over insurgents or at least hold them at bay. Asad may judge that his move to declare and destroy his government's chemical weapons has eased international pressure on his government, and that Geneva II would further expose opposition divisions—perhaps thereby demonstrating that his government lacks a credible negotiating partner. Syrian officials continue to suggest that Asad may stand for reelection in a presidential election scheduled for later this year, in spite of opposition demands that he leave power either prior to or as a result of negotiations to establish the transitional governing body outlined in the June 2012 Geneva principles. Asad has stated that presidential elections will include multiple candidates in accordance with Syria's new constitution,<sup>12</sup> but it is unclear what restrictions the government may impose on those seeking to participate. As noted above, the United States and other members of the Core Group on Syria have rejected Asad's potential candidacy.

The Syrian government has sought formal Iranian participation in the talks, which U.S. officials oppose. On January 5, Secretary of State John Kerry suggested that Iran could play an informal role in discussions, a proposal dismissed by Iranian officials as inadequate. Iranian officials have acknowledged that they are providing support to pro-Asad forces, and U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford has stated that Iran has played an “especially pernicious” role in helping Asad build militias and attract support from Hezbollah and Iraqi militia groups.<sup>13</sup>

President Asad and his supporters have used the increasingly prominent role played by Al Qaeda-linked groups in Syria to support the case they have made since the start of the uprising that the alternative to Asad's rule would be a takeover of the country by Islamist extremists. Fighters from ISIL in early January participated in the temporary seizure of the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Falluja, highlighting the threat that the extremism and sectarianism on display in Syria could take deeper root in neighboring states. Jordanian officials, who view extremism as among the most serious threats to Jordan's internal stability, have previously stated that Amman seeks a strong Syrian state capable of controlling its borders.<sup>14</sup> Jordanian leaders may assess that their interest in curbing cross-border terrorism would be best served by continued Asad rule, but they are dependent for fiscal support on Gulf allies who are committed to Asad's removal. The Syrian government is likely to continue to emphasize the shared threat presented by Al Qaeda to urge regional and international actors to prioritize counterterrorism over regime change.

While the expansion of Al Qaeda-linked attacks outside Syria could lead some neighboring states to consider thawing relations with Asad, it also could prompt current regime allies such as Hezbollah or Iraqi Shiite militia fighters to devote more resources to their internal threats. For example, ISIL claimed responsibility for a January car bomb attack on a Hezbollah-controlled area of Beirut, describing the attack as the first in a series of strikes aimed at retaliating for the

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<sup>12</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency, “President al-Assad gives interview to the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper,” June 17, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Ambassador Robert Ford, Statement before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 11, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Bassam al Baddarin, “Phobia of Dar'a battle worries Jordanians,” *Al Quds al Arabi* (London), November 20, 2013.

group's military intervention in Syria.<sup>15</sup> Escalating violence in Lebanon or Iraq could eventually limit the resources Hezbollah or Iraqi groups are willing to commit to Syria, if they judge that manpower resources are needed closer to home.

## **Chemical Weapons and Disarmament: Background<sup>16</sup>**

Damascus is believed to have more than 1,000 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals. This stockpile includes several hundred metric tons of the nerve agent sarin, which represents the bulk of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. Damascus also has several hundred metric tons of mustard agent in ready-to-use form and several metric tons of VX. The Asad regime has several thousand delivery vehicles, including several hundred Scud-type ballistic missiles. Damascus also has other types of ballistic missiles, aerial bombs, and artillery rockets.<sup>17</sup>

A major policy concern of the United States has been the use or loss of control of chemical weapons stocks in Syria during that country's ongoing civil war. The United States and other countries have assessed that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons repeatedly against opposition forces in the country. The largest-scale use to date was on August 21, 2013. The U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic released its report on September 16, 2013, concluding that surface-to-surface rockets containing sarin were used in the Ghouta area of Damascus against civilians on a "relatively large scale." The U.N. investigative mission was not tasked with assigning culpability for the attacks.

On August 31, 2013, President Obama stated that the United States should respond with "military action against Syrian regime targets" in response to the August 21 attack and added that he would ask Congress to grant authorization for the use of military force. However, President Obama subsequently explained in a September 10 speech that he had asked congressional leaders to postpone a vote to authorize the use of military force in order to give the Administration time to pursue a diplomatic initiative to rid Syria of chemical weapons. The Syrian government, which had previously been among the small number of governments worldwide not to have signed on to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), submitted its instrument of accession on September 14, 2013; the Convention entered into force for Syria on October 14, 2013 and requires Syria to destroy all of its chemical weapons. Based on a joint U.S.-Russian proposal, the Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), an intergovernmental body tasked with implementation of the CWC, adopted a chemical weapons destruction plan for Syria on September 27, 2013. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, which the Council unanimously adopted on September 27, 2013, requires Syria to comply with "all aspects" of the OPCW decision.

As a party to the CWC, Syria is required to declare all of its stocks and destroy its chemical weapons program under international supervision. The OPCW executive decision requires Damascus to "complete the elimination of all chemical weapons material and equipment in the first half of 2014," or by June 30, 2014. The decision also requires Damascus to "cooperate fully with all aspects of the implementation of this decision, including by providing the OPCW

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<sup>15</sup> Hussein Dakroub, "Hezbollah undeterred by ISIS claim, threats," *Daily Star*, January 6, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin.

<sup>17</sup> For details of Syria's chemical weapons holdings, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mary Beth D. Nikitin.

personnel with the immediate and unfettered right to inspect any and all sites” in Syria. Under Resolution 2118, the OPCW is to report to the U.N. Security Council on implementation on a monthly basis.

A joint mission of U.N. and OPCW personnel was created to monitor and facilitate Syrian chemical weapons disarmament.<sup>18</sup> OPCW-U.N. experts arrived in Damascus on October 1, 2013 and began to inspect Syria’s declared chemical weapons facilities. The OPCW spokesman told reporters on October 31 that the Syrian government met the November 1, 2013, destruction deadline for disabling production equipment, and that all chemical weapons stocks and agents in Syria were under “tamper-proof” seal. The first stage of destruction activities focused on destroying “critical equipment” at chemical weapons production facilities and mixing and filling units. The OPCW spokesman said that destruction methods for these items were “low-tech and quick and cheap,” include “smashing things, cutting things, in some cases using cement and other things; [and] smashing things with heavy vehicles.”

The current stage of the chemical weapons destruction process involves transportation and removal of chemical weapons agents from the country. These are liquid chemicals that have not been loaded into delivery vehicles. The OPCW Executive Council on November 14, 2013, approved the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons agents (“priority 1” chemicals) outside of Syria due to the security situation in the country. The United States and others have provided equipment to the OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission to help safely transfer these chemicals from storage facilities to the Syrian port of Latakia. Danish and Norwegian ships are to pick up the chemicals and remove them from Syria.

Syria did not meet the original deadline of December 31 for removal of these agents from its territory. According to the OPCW Director General, the delays were caused by, “security concerns, the procurement and delivery of large quantities of packaging and transportation materials and equipment, and adverse weather conditions.”<sup>19</sup> Reports in early January quoted Syrian government official as saying two CW storage sites have been under attack.<sup>20</sup>

On January 7, 2014, the OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission announced that the first “quantity of priority chemical materials” was removed from two sites within Syria, taken to the port of Latakia, and loaded onto a Danish vessel. Once all the chemicals have been removed, the most dangerous compounds will be transferred at an Italian port to a U.S. ship for destruction at sea in international waters. Other chemicals will be shipped to commercial processing facilities.

No country had agreed to conduct destruction operations on its territory due to public concerns about the dangers of the material, but also due to the short timeline for destruction which in some cases would not have allowed for the required environmental and health impact assessments. Therefore, the United States plans to neutralize the liquid chemical weapons agents on board the Maritime Administration’s Motor Vessel (MV) Cape Ray using newly-installed field deployable hydrolysis systems (FDHS). This ship is expected to receive 700 metric tons of both mustard

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://opcw.unmissions.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Director General says Removal of Priority Chemicals in Syria Marks Important New Phase in Work of Joint Mission,” OPCW press release, January 8, 2014, <http://www.opcw.org/news/article/director-general-removal-of-priority-chemicals-in-syria-marks-important-new-phase-in-work-of/>.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce and Rick Gladstone, “Syrian Government Reports 2 Attacks on Chemical Arms Sites,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/09/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-arms.html>.

agent and DF compound, a key component in sarin.<sup>21</sup> U.S. personnel, including 64 Army chemical specialists, will run the operation.

For more information on Syria's chemical weapons and U.S. and international participation in the disarmament process, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mary Beth D. Nikitin.

## **U.S. Policy and Assistance**

Administration officials have stated that U.S. military intervention to shape the outcome of Syria's civil conflict or to change the Syrian regime may not achieve U.S. objectives, and may lead to unintended negative consequences. Administration officials have cited a number of reasons for their reluctance to undertake direct military intervention or provide large-scale assistance to shift the balance of power in Syria, including fears of exacerbating the violence; inviting greater regional spillover or intervention; or opening a power vacuum that could benefit the extremists who are part of the opposition.<sup>22</sup> Uncertain costs, military constraints, and domestic political opposition to such involvement also are likely factors.

Some critics of the Administration's policy argue that many of these negative outcomes are occurring even in the absence of U.S. intervention and others express concern that the United States cannot ensure the provided support will not benefit extremist groups. While condemning Asad as a thug and a murderer and aiding some of his adversaries, Administration officials have continued to stress the need for a negotiated political solution to the conflict in the hopes of keeping the Syrian state intact, securing its weapon stockpiles and borders, and combating extremist groups now active there.

The implementation of U.S. strategy in Syria to date has included the provision of both nonlethal and lethal assistance to select Syrian opposition groups, a sustained international diplomatic effort to establish a negotiated transition, and the provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria and neighboring countries. These initiatives have been implemented under the auspices of an ad hoc series of assistance notifications to Congress providing for the waiver of certain restrictions on the use of U.S. funds for assistance in Syria and the assertion of emergency contingency authorities to reprogram and allocate funds for use in response to the crisis. Cumulatively, the notifications illustrate an evolution of U.S. involvement in the direction of seeking deeper partnership with select opposition actors on the ground in Syria, while seeking to bolster and unify opposition figures based outside of Syria.

At the October 2013 Friends of Syria conference in London, Secretary Kerry announced that the United States, along with other members of the "London 11" group, had "agreed to increase ... coordinated assistance to the opposition, including to the Syrian Opposition Coalition ... And we also committed to do more to assist the brave people who are on the ground in Syria." The Obama Administration subsequently notified Congress of plans to expand nonlethal assistance to various opposition groups. Prior to recent events, U.S. efforts to improve coordination among

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<sup>21</sup> "Army to Destroy Syrian Chemical Weapons Aboard Ship," *Army News Service*, January 3, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Other competing foreign policy priorities also have influenced the Administration's position, such as a desire to maintain Russian and Chinese support for international sanctions on Iran's nuclear program and concern that sectarian and strategic competition in Syria could ignite a regional conflict and threaten U.S. allies and global security interests.

opposition groups in aid delivery had mixed success, with some observers criticizing the SOC's Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) for lacking capacity and duplicating partnerships among donors and local organizations.

As of late 2013, the United States had allocated more than \$220 million in support of the non-armed opposition (including the SOC and local activists), and the delivery of further assistance to northern Syria remained suspended as a result of the Islamic Front's seizure of SOC/SMC controlled warehouse facilities and ongoing intra-opposition fighting. In the wake of the incident the Obama Administration "decided that it was a risk to be providing that assistance if it's going to the extremists."<sup>23</sup> On January 12, Secretary Kerry said the Administration is "considering the renewal of that assistance to the opposition," and said, "We're beginning to believe we may be in a place where that can now resume, and we would obviously want to get back to where we were. That's why we put it there in the first place."<sup>24</sup> The conference version of the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations bill (H.R. 3547) would provide new authority for the Administration to use FY2014 and previously appropriated Economic Support Fund (ESF) account funding to provide nonlethal assistance for certain purposes in Syria (see textbox below). An unspecified, but likely large amount of funding would be subject to this authority.

As with humanitarian assistance, U.S. efforts to support local security and service delivery efforts to date have been hindered by a lack of regular access to areas in need. According to Administration officials, border closures, ongoing fighting, and risks from extremist groups have presented unique challenges. U.S. officials have stated their expectation that U.S. equipment will be returned to the control of SMC leaders by the Islamic Front and reiterated their view that the SOC and SMC remain the "legitimate representatives of the Syrian opposition and the Syrian people."<sup>25</sup> Meeting in Paris on January 12, the United States and other Core Group members stated that they "fully support the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army and other democratic opposition forces in their action against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)."

In light of these developments, the future nature and direction of U.S. engagement with certain Syrian opposition groups may be in flux. On the one hand, advocates of continued U.S. support for opposition groups aligned with U.S. values and preferences argue that the withdrawal or reduction of such assistance would bolster less cooperative or friendly groups. Advocates further argue that if the United States withdraws or reduces its support, then it may "force" moderate groups to turn to extremist groups for funding and support—thereby increasing the influence of extremists while reducing U.S. leverage. On the other hand, critics of continued U.S. support argue that such assistance risks exacerbating rivalry among opposition groups and reducing the credibility of groups and individuals seen to be aligned with the United States. Critics of support further point problems in ensuring the identity of end users of provided support and the uses of U.S.-provided support. Administration officials have stated that they remain open to engagement with all opposition groups not affiliated with Al Qaeda. The Islamic Front reportedly has rebuffed U.S. requests for consultation to date, and its charter states that it rejects "foreign dictates that undermine its decision-making capabilities."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry, Remarks With Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Muhammad al Atiyah, Paris, France, January 12, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Statement of U.S. State Department Spokesperson Marie Harf, Press Briefing, Washington, DC, December 16, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> OSC Document TRR2013112671951889.

### **FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act and Nonlethal Assistance in Syria**

Section 7041(i) of Division K of the conference version of the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (H.R. 3547) would significantly expand the Administration's authority to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes using the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account. Such assistance has been restricted to date by a series of preexisting provisions of law (including some terrorism-related provisions) that have required the President to assert emergency and contingency authorities to provide such assistance to the Syrian opposition and communities in Syria. The new authority would make FY2014 and prior year ESF funding available "notwithstanding any other provision of law for non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to—

- (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable;
- (B) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law;
- (C) further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs;
- (D) develop civil society and an independent media in Syria;
- (E) promote economic development in Syria;
- (F) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations; and
- (G) counter extremist ideologies."

The bill would require the Secretary of State to "take all appropriate steps to ensure that mechanisms are in place for the adequate monitoring, oversight, and control of such assistance inside Syria," and require the Secretary of State to "promptly inform the appropriate congressional committees of each significant instance in which assistance provided pursuant to the authority of this subsection has been compromised, to include the type and amount of assistance affected, a description of the incident and parties involved, and an explanation of the Department of State's response." The latter provision may of particular interest in light of the reported seizure of U.S. provided assistance by armed groups in December 2013.

The bill would require the Obama Administration to submit a comprehensive interagency strategy prior to using the funds that would include a "mission statement, achievable objectives and timelines, and a description of inter-agency and donor coordination and implementation of such strategy." The strategy, which may be classified, must also include "a description of oversight and vetting procedures to prevent the misuse of funds." All funds obligated pursuant to the new authority would be subject to established congressional notification procedures.

In the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, other proposals to authorize the expanded provision of nonlethal and lethal assistance in Syria with various provisos have been considered, including S. 960, the Syria Transition Support Act of 2013, and H.R. 1327, the Free Syria Act of 2013. S. 960 was approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as amended by a 15-3 vote in May 2013.

Efforts to provide lethal assistance to armed opposition elements have similarly evolved and were reported to be expanding in late 2013 amid criticism by some opposition leaders that desired support has not been forthcoming. In June 2013, National Security Council spokesman Ben Rhodes said that the President had "authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council," and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in a September 2013 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Administration was taking steps to provide arms to some Syrian rebels under covert action authorities.<sup>27</sup> Press reports have cited unidentified U.S. officials suggesting that as of early October 2013, very little lethal equipment had been delivered and fewer than 1,000 opposition fighters had received U.S. supervised training

<sup>27</sup> Secretary Hagel said, "it was June of this year that the president made the decision to support lethal assistance to the opposition. As you all know, we have been very supportive with hundreds of millions of dollars of non-lethal assistance. The vetting process that Secretary Kerry noted has been significant, but—I'll ask General Dempsey if he wants to add anything—but we, the Department of Defense, have not been directly involved in this. This is, as you know, a covert action. And, as Secretary Kerry noted, probably to [go] into much more detail would—would require a closed or classified hearing."

in Jordan. CRS cannot confirm these reports. Press reports further suggested that the program was being enlarged to produce “a few hundred trained fighters each month,”<sup>28</sup> but it is unclear what effect, if any, recent developments, including infighting among opposition groups, have had on any such plans or programs.

To date, U.S. officials have not publicly described in detail which elements of the opposition may be receiving training, what such training may entail, what types of weaponry may be provided in the program, and what safeguards may be in place to monitor the disposition of equipment and the actions of any U.S. trained personnel. In late September, the Administration notified Congress of its intent to use emergency authorities available to the President under the Foreign Assistance Act to provide additional “nonlethal commodities and services” to the SMC. According to the State Department, the United States has allocated \$80 million to date to provide non-lethal support to the SMC.

On October 22, Secretary Kerry said that the “London 11” group had “agreed to direct military aid exclusively through the Supreme Military Council ... to curtail the influence of extremists, to isolate the extremists, and to change the balance on the ground.”<sup>29</sup> However, as noted above, several prominent Islamist militia groups now coordinate their operations independent of the SMC and have rejected the political and military leadership of the SOC/SMC. It remains to be seen whether these realignments and policy statements and the Islamic Front’s actions to seize facilities controlled by U.S. backed groups have decisively changed the context in which the United States and its allies are providing support to the armed opposition, or how such support may change.

## Outlook

Looking ahead, U.S. policy makers face a series of difficult choices as they seek to balance their demands that Asad ultimately leave power on the one hand, and their desire for the Syrian government to remain cooperative with implementation of the OPCW Executive Council decision and the provision of humanitarian access on the other. By seeking a negotiated solution, U.S. policy apparently seeks to bring the conflict to a close while maintaining the security benefits associated with the preservation of some Syrian state institutions. However, recent statements by U.S. officials and other members of the Core Group envision negotiations that will end with the leaders of the current regime having no part in transitional governance in Syria. Meanwhile, powerful armed Islamist opposition forces reject negotiation, seek the creation of an Islamic state, and have vowed to continue fighting until the entire Syrian government is toppled. Reconciling the current U.S. diplomatic strategy with the simultaneous provision of U.S. assistance to select elements of the opposition may become more difficult in the event that negotiations begin and show promise, or in the event that anti-U.S. Islamist forces or Al Qaeda affiliates make further gains at the expense of their counterparts. Responding to the humanitarian needs generated by the crisis and working to prevent the destabilization of Syria’s neighbors will remain key agenda items for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>28</sup> Greg Miller, “CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013; and, Adam Entous and Nour Malas, “U.S. Still Hasn’t Armed Syrian Rebels,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry, London, United Kingdom, October 22, 2013.



## Appendix. Select Group Profiles

The following descriptions of armed groups operating in Syria are provided as reference estimates compiled, reconciled, and edited by CRS from third-party open-source analysis.<sup>30</sup> CRS cannot independently verify the size, equipment, and current areas of operation of the groups described. In considering these and other analyses of the size, composition, and goals of specific groups there are several factors to consider:

- At present, open source analysis of armed groups operating in Syria relies largely on the self-reporting of individual groups and coalitions. Information is not evenly and regularly available for all groups. Verification is imperfect and is based on independent analysis of self-reported and third party-reported information. Social media outlets and news reports can help verify information, but most analysts consider it to be very difficult to confirm data points.
- There are hundreds of active militia forces, ranging in size from a few dozen to thousands and organized around a wide variety of local communities, ethnic and religious identities, and political-religious ideologies. The size and relative strength of groups have varied and will continue to vary by location and time.
- Trends in the conflict have reflected both diversification and profusion of armed groups and improvement in the size and capabilities of some actors relative to others. Many groups and units who claim to coordinate under various fronts and coalitions in fact appear to operate independently and reserve the right to change allegiances.
- The use of religious or secular imagery and messages by groups may not be reliable indicators of the long term political aims of their members or their likely success in implementing those aims. Factors motivating individuals to support certain groups may not be ideological but practical. For example, the funding available to Islamist groups from various public and private sources in the Persian Gulf may be leading some secular groups to adopt Islamist rhetoric. Others may mask extremist agendas.

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<sup>30</sup> CRS consulted the following sources and others while preparing the analysis below: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube outlets associated with groups. Charles Lister, "Syria's insurgency beyond Good Guys and Bad Guys," *ForeignPolicy.com – Middle East Channel* (blog), September 20, 2013. Charles Lister, "Syria's Insurgent Landscape," *IHS Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor/IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre*, September 2013. Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center, *CTC Sentinel*, August 2013. Ian Black, "Saudi Arabia to spend millions to train new rebel force," *The Guardian* (UK), November 7, 2013. Michael Weiss, "Mergers and Acquisitions," *NOW. Online* (Lebanon), October 29, 2013. OSC Document PLN2013100218082086, "Syria: Chief of Newly-Formed 'Jaysh al-Islam' Coalition Interviewed on Al-Qa'ida Ties, Geneva II," *Al Jazirah Live Satellite Television* (Doha) in Arabic, September 20, 2013. Aron Lund, "Islamist Groups Declare Opposition to National Coalition and U.S. Strategy," *Syria Comment* (blog), September 24-5, 2013. OSC Document TRR2013112671951889, "Syria: New 'Islamic Front' Formation Releases Charter," November 26, 2013. Aron Lund, "Say Hello to the Islamic Front," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis* (blog), November 22, 2013. Aaron Y. Zelin, "Rebels Consolidating Strength in Syria: The Islamic Front," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch* 2177, December 3, 2013.

Figure A-1. Select Anti-Asad Armed Groups

Select Anti-Asad Armed Groups	
	<p><b>Supreme Military Command Council (SMC)</b> <i>Leader: Salim Idriss</i></p> <p>The formation of the Supreme Military Command Council (SMC) in December 2012 sought to reorganize non-extremist armed opposition and to create regional commands and cooperative committees under the leadership of General Salim Idriss. Members include armed brigades made up of various combinations of dissident military personnel and civilian recruits, including many forces otherwise identified as members of the “Free Syrian Army” and Islamist militia groups participating in other coalitions. Idriss’ direct command authority over members of the Council had not been demonstrated as of late 2013, when some Islamist SMC members withdrew recognition from the SMC and denounced the political opposition coalition with which the SMC is affiliated. The Islamic Front later moved to seize SMC facilities and equipment, while other nominally SMC-affiliated figures continue to operate their own militia groups independently. U.S. assistance to the SMC was suspended as of early January 2014.</p>
	<p><b>Al Jabhat al Islamiya (Islamic Front)</b></p> <p>Formed in November 2013, the Islamic Front brings together several of the most powerful Sunni Islamist militia groups in Syria under a shared program, although the full extent and unity of the group and its military command structure remain to be seen. According to the Front’s charter, it seeks “the full overthrow of the al Asad regime in Syria and for building an Islamic state ruled by the sharia of God Almighty alone.” The Front has attempted to position itself as a relatively moderate coordinating body for likeminded Sunni Islamist opposition groups and as an alternative to the exclusionary and brutal approach of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Front’s charter states that its members believe that force of arms alone will achieve its goal of completely toppling the Asad government, and the Front explicitly rejects the concepts of secularism and a civil state. Its charter states that it will not accept “foreign dictates that undermine its decision-making capabilities” and that it “will not participate in any political activity that violates religion or bestows the power of governance upon anything but the sharia of God Almighty.” The following armed groups constitute the core of the Islamic Front and were the original signatories of its charter: Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya; Saqour al Sham; Ansar al Sham; Jaysh al Islam; Liwa al Tawhid; and Liwa al Haqq.</p>
	<p><b>Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya (Ahrar al Sham)</b> <i>Leader: Hassan Abboud</i></p> <p>The “Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant” is a coalition of Salafist-jihadist militias active across Syria. Its statements suggest that its members are motivated by anti-Shiite sectarian views and by support for the establishment of an Islamic state. Ahrar al Sham led the creation of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) in December 2012 and then merged with other SIF members, bringing its forces into closer coordination with other similarly minded militias in northern and eastern Syria. In September 2013, terrorism analyst Charles Lister of IHS Janes called the group “arguably the most strategically powerful militant actor in Syria” and credited its humanitarian relief division with being “the most influential militant-run provider of services in Syria.” The group subsequently aligned itself with the Islamic Front, and Ahrar al Sham leader Hassan Abboud serves as the head of the Front’s political office.</p>
	<p><b>Saqour al Sham</b> <i>Leader: Ahmed Issa al Sheikh</i></p> <p>Based in northwestern Idlib province, the “Falcons of Syria” are a Salafist-jihadist militia group that calls for the establishment of an Islamic state and has made contradictory statements about Syrian religious minorities. The group’s estimated nine thousand fighters are considered by many analysts to be among the more religiously conservative forces within the Islamist faction of the Syrian opposition. Ahmed Issa al Sheikh serves as the overall leader of the Islamic Front.</p>
	<p><b>Jaysh al Islam</b> <i>Leader: Zahran Alloush</i></p> <p>Based in the Damascus suburbs, the “Army of Islam” (formerly Liwa al Islam or “the Islam Brigade”), is a coalition of Islamist militia led by Salafist figure Zahran Alloush. Alloush’s brigade was credited with the July 2012 bomb attack that killed then-Minister of Defense General Dawoud Rajiha and Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat and injured several other prominent regime security officials. After reorganizing the brigade and recruiting others to join an expanded coalition, Alloush launched the Army of Islam and aligned the group with the Islamic Front, of which he serves as the nominal military commander. Prior to the merger, Alloush was reported to receive support from Saudi Arabia and command as many as 5,000 fighters with an arsenal that included armored vehicles.</p>

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**Figure A-2. U.S.-Designated Sunni Terrorist Groups**

U.S.-Designated Sunni Terrorist Groups	
	<p><b>Jabhat Al Nusra (The Support Front for the People of Syria)</b> <i>Leader: Abu Mohammad al Golani</i>  A Salafi-jihadist militia, the “Support Front for the People of Syria” emerged in early 2012 and claimed responsibility for a series of high profile suicide bombing attacks against government security forces as well as summary executions of captured regime soldiers. Its leader Abu Mohammed al Golani has stated his allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, and the group’s messaging, tactics, and ideology mirror those of Al Qaeda affiliates in other regional conflict zones. Unofficial estimates suggest it may have as many as 6,000 fighters operating across Syria. Reporting from Syria suggests that Al Nusra Front members have been coordinating with other opposition factions in northern and southern Syria, but not always consistently or successfully. Nusra members engage in organized relief work and service provision efforts to curry favor with civilians, and the group positioned itself as a mediator during January 2014 clashes between other opposition groups and the more uncompromisingly violent Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The prospect for clashes between Al Nusra and other groups remains, as the Front’s uncompromising views on the long-term implementation of Islamic religious law may create rifts with other Sunni Arabs and Kurds, not to mention religious minorities. The United States has designated Al Nusra as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and two of its leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists acting on behalf of Al Qaeda in Iraq (also an FTO) pursuant to Executive Order 13224.</p>
	<p><b>The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)</b> <i>Leader: Abu Bakr al Baghdadi</i>  Estimates of ISIL strength in Syria vary, but some observers believe ISIL may have had as many as 4,000 fighters in the field prior to the January 2014 outbreak of hostilities with other opposition forces. Its main areas of operation are in northern and eastern Syria near the borders of Turkey and Iraq, although ISIL fighters also are reported to operate in and around Homs and on the outskirts of Damascus, with less of a reported presence in southern Syria. ISIL fighters have engaged in sectarian attacks against Shiite and Christian religious sites and individuals suspected of being Shiite fighters. After taking control of the town of Raqqa, ISIL moved to control a key border crossing with Turkey at Azaz, north of Aleppo, and impose themselves in other areas of Idlib and Aleppo provinces. ISIL clashed with Kurdish and other Arab militia groups in the north prior to January 2014, and the outbreak of widespread hostilities with other opposition forces has appeared to result in the ISIL sustaining considerable tactical losses. ISIL’s strategic prospects appear less certain than they did prior to the fighting, but the group had not been defeated. ISIL has been reported to include hundreds of foreign fighters affiliated with the Jaysh al Muhajirin wal Ansar (the Army of Expatriates and Supporters), although foreign fighters were reported to be especially targeted by groups angered by ISIL’s extremism and violent tactics.</p>

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